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MOUNTAINEERS AREN'T REALLY ILLITERATE.

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IT IS IMPORTANT TO RECOGNIZE THAT APPALACHIAN CHILDREN ARE NOT ILLITERATES. THEY HAVE A VERY SOPHISTICATED LANGUAGE WITH WHICH THEY COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY WITHIN THEIR OWN COMMUNITY. THEIR LANGUAGE SYSTEM, HOWEVER, IS NOT LIKE THE STANDARD AMERICAN ENGLISH, BUT IS LEARNED ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY FROM ORAL TRADITION AND HAS CHANGED VERY LITTLE FOR GENERATIONS. THUS, WHEN THE SCHOOLS IMPOSE MIDDLE-CLASS READING AND WRITING CODES APPALACHIAN CHILDREN FAIL AND ARE CONSIDERED ILLITERATE. THE READING MATERIALS USED IN APPALACHIAN SCHOOLS HAVE NO RELEVANCY TO THESE CHILDREN WHO HAVE NOT HAD THE MAINSTREAM CULTURAL EXPERIENCE. MOREOVER, THE GRAPHEMES OF STANDARD ENGLISH DO NOT CONVEY TO THEM THE SOUNDS THEY CUSTOMARILY USE. THE CRITICAL NEED FOR APPALACHIAN SCHOOLS IS PRESCHOOL ORAL LANGUAGE PROGRAM USING STANDARD AMERICAN ENGLISH WHICH IS DESIGNED TO GIVE STUDENTS A BASIS FOR LEARNING TO READ IN THE FIRST GRADE. THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN THE "SOUTHERN EDUCATION REPORT," VOLUME 3, NUMBER 1, JULY-AUGUST 1967. (NH)

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By Vincent P. Skinner

Many people think of illiteracy almost instantly when their minds turn to the people of the sprawling Appalachian Mountains. Such thoughts are fed by almost every statistic about education in this nearly isolated belt of American ridges. Items:

- Almost a third of Appalachian youth fail Selective Service mental tests, compared with a national average of 22.8 per cent.
- More students in Appalachia are below the national norm on achievement tests than are above it.
- Appalachia still has 1,046 one- and two-room schools—more than remain in any other comparable area of the country.
- Appalachian schools have fewer curriculum supervisors than those elsewhere—and the ratio of guidance counselors to students is about one to 1,300.
- Advanced work for superior students is offered by many fewer schools in Appalachia than in other parts of the United States.

But the matter of illiteracy among these distinctive mountain folk is considerably different from the problems of reading and writing in other American regions. The difference lies to a great degree in communications—in language. Mountain speech is learned almost entirely from oral tradition; it has changed little for generations.

A folk tale, quoted by Cratis D. Williams in the spring issue of *Mountain Life & Work*, offers an approximate sample:

"Oncet they 'uz a fox 'at 'uz a-goin daown to the settle-mints one mornin to the store. Whilest he 'uz a-sankerin along, he seed a bummel-bee a-suckin after one o' these hyur mornin' glories. So's he snuck up right easy and rech aout and snabbed it and popped it into a poke he had with 'im. . . ."

Most frequently, illiteracy is defined as the inability to read and write in some arbitrary standard. Appalachian children have trouble reaching the usually prescribed standard because of the speech characteristics they bring with them to school. They have a language system—a very complex and, indeed, sophisticated one—but it is not like the middle-class language systems prevalent in most sections of the nation.

Unfortunately, the usual definition of illiteracy suggests that it can be cured by devising better ways to teach reading and writing. Yet, millions of American children *do* learn to read and write under the present ways of teaching. These children start their schooling already quite skilled in the use of standard American speech—and reading and writing are simply the *codes* by which skilled users of language communicate.

The real problem with teaching Appalachian children is not to devise newer and/or different methods of giving them reading and writing skills. All children, even the very young, can learn to use these two codes if they first have learned to use language effectively.

Illiteracy among the Appalachian people is really the result of our failure to supply these children with the means of learning to use the language effectively. We impose upon them a language system totally alien to their experiences, and we incorporate reading and writing codes into it. When the pupils cannot meet our demand that they learn *our* language system, we label them problem readers and illiterates.

Such children are not illiterates; they only appear to be so when we measure them according to our middle-class language system. The question of the language system is the key—and here is the dilemma for the teachers of Appalachia.

In Appalachian schools, we use the usual sorts of texts and other materials that have the middle-class language system as their base. We demand that the children learn the decoding and encoding systems used in standard American English—and many Appalachian children cannot do this. They have not had the necessary experience of living in a culture that

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talks like "standard" Americans.

There are two reasons for this lack of experience. A century of isolation because of geography has deprived the Appalachians of the growth and changes in language that have come in other parts of the nation. Because of this isolation, the channels of communication—including newspapers, radio and television—have not developed as completely as they have elsewhere.

Thus, the language the Appalachian children bring to school is not the language of the schools they attend. At least, it is not the language of the printed words they encounter in their textbooks.

Learning to use a language is a complex process which first involves learning to distinguish the patterns of the functioning units (words) and those that identify the grammatical structures. Second, the learner has to recall almost instantly the meanings that are attached to these patterns. Third, the learner must produce these patterns for the recognition of other members of the language community. Appalachian children can do all these with their present language system, but performing these efficiently with standard American English is something else.

Learning to read is not a procedure of learning new or other language symbols; the language signals are all the same. Learning to read, like talking, involves the process of obtaining the same message (the same meanings) by responding to the same set of language signals. In the case of reading, the language signals are in graphic (written) shapes rather than in sound waves. Essentially, the process of learning to read is the process of transfer from the auditory signs for the language signals to the *visual* signals. Learning to read efficiently requires that the child develop a wide range of high-speed recognition responses to specific sets of patterns in graphic form.

Here is one of the difficulties in teaching reading, and for the Appalachian child it is a doubly complex and tedious task. But if the printed materials were written in the language patterns he brings to school with him, he would have little, if any, difficulty. Teachers should allow more time for practice in the contrastive shapes so that children can learn to *identify* and *distinguish* the graphic shapes of the letters, just as they have learned to distinguish the auditory signs in the speech process.

It would appear that a program must be introduced to Appalachian children which would permit them to acquire the standard American English language system. Granted, they are introduced to standard American English, but at the *wrong critical point.* We cannot continue to demand that they demonstrate facility at the reading readiness stage until they have had an opportunity to develop facility in the oral stage first.

The critical need for Appalachian schools, or for others in this position, is a preschool oral language program based on standard American English so that the Appalachian child has a fighting chance when he encounters the printed word in the first grade. The sooner we do this, the sooner we are going to reduce that "illiteracy rate" statistic. ○

"Nyurly ever'body . . . knowed Preacher John"

Cratis D. Williams, writer of a recent series on mountain speech in Mountain Life & Work *(published by the Council of the Southern Mountains, Inc., at Berea, Ky.), converted into illiterate or semiliterate mountaineer English two paragraphs from Jesse Stuart's* Foretaste of Glory *(1946). Williams explained that the language he uses "is not so much representative as it is archetypal. Although one might find only a few mountaineers in a given community speaking English that includes* all *peculiarities represented, he would find most of the rural mountaineers speaking English that includes* most *of them."*

Didn't nobody pay nary bit o' mind ter this hyar old white-haired preacher that'd been 'laowed jist ter live on thar in the preacher's haouse atter he quit preachin. They'd been a rift in his denomination back younder in the time o' that trouble betwixt the Dimmercrats and Repubblecans, but the two prongs had jined back together agin atter a hundret yurs had gone by. Hit left the home and the meetin haouse that he'd preached in to be sold to the highest bidder, naow that ever'body of his faith and order would be a'goin to jist one church haouse. His impty meetin haouse was the one whar Dee Addin'ton war naow daown on his hunkers a paoundin on the locked doors and a-baggin of the Lord fer to let 'im in. Dee he didn't have sense a nough abaout meetin haouses to know whichens had shet daown and whichens 'uz still open.

Nyurly ever'body in Blakesburg taown knowed Preacher John. He'd preached nigh on ter twelve yur at his meetin haouse, and fer abaout three yur atter he'd quit they'd seed 'im a-doin little odd jobs o' work fer fust one and then t'othern abaout the taown fer to he'p aout his little pinchin pay that warn't more'n a nough ter kindy keep body and soul together nohaow. Endurin the summertime they'd seed 'im with his goose-neck hoe acrost his shoulders a-goin fer to hoe his 'taters in the big gyarden patch he tended fer to raise a nough stuff ter winter him and his old womern on. Hit's a many a time they'd seed him a-mosyin' daown the street alongside o' Rufe Litt'al, both of 'em with a long-handle hoe acrost thar shoulders, a-goin fer to hoe thar 'taters. And naow, this hyar old preacher he was jist a-tryin to raise his failin voice up above the uproar and spluttermint so's he could be hyared and at one and the same time clur them streets thar when scyurd folks'd come towardge 'im.